

Aspects of Well-Being at Work

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Are we confronted with a tragic, insolvable dilemma? Must we produce sick people to have a healthy economy, or can we use our material resources, our inventions, our computers to serve the ends of man? Must individuals be passive and dependent to have strong and well functioning organizations?¹

With only a third of U.S. employees engaged at work (32%), half (50.3%) are ‘not engaged’ and 16.8% are ‘actively disengaged.’² Worldwide, the figure for engaged employees drops to 13%.

Abstract

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¹ E. Fromm, *The revolution of hope: Toward a humanized technology* (Riverdale, New York: American Mental Health Foundation Books, (2010), p. 14

² A. Adkins, U.S. employee engagement reaches three-year high. (2015, March 9). www.gallup.com

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A comprehensive framework for assessing well-being should include how well-being inside organizations is established. Does one's experience in the workplace contribute to well-being? Does one have the ability to achieve inner satisfaction through work? It behoves advocates of GNH to identify and measure those aspects of life at work that contribute to the individual's well-being to have a more comprehensive picture of the full human experience. This paper addresses the structural issues that interfere with the creation of well-being at work and suggests some sources to consider to learn about more congruent ways of being at work.

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From a public policy perspective, Bhutan's advocacy of GNH (Gross National Happiness) has had a phenomenal influence on how the world measures development and the well-being of its citizens. Measuring GNH is indicative of a new focus on quality of life and not just the increase in economic transactions. The growing popularity of GNH shows that it has raised the consciousness of millions of people regarding what really matters in terms of actionable public policy indicators of well-being. Clearly, the measureable economic artefacts alone cannot explain personal fulfilment, social cohesion, or the value of the collective experience of life, but GNH helps tune in to those and other dimensions of personal and collective satisfaction to get a reasonable facsimile of what is important to people and for policy makers to improve the lives of its citizens.

One of the four pillars of GNH, sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, recognizes that "A thriving GNH economy must value social and economic contributions of households and families, free time and leisure given the roles of these factors in Happiness" (GNH Centre Bhutan, n.d.). However, of all the 33 indicators used to measure each of the nine GNH domains, only one is relevant to work. To determine that factor, these questions were asked:

How satisfied are you with your standard of living?

How satisfied are you with your major occupation?

How satisfied are you with your work life balance?

Notably, the sufficiency threshold for work, according to the survey, is 480 minutes, or eight hours per day. Though employment is important, the nature of the workplace experience is even more important in determining one's happiness; yet, it remains beyond the surveys and instruments used to calculate GNH, well-being, and life satisfaction in the overwhelming majority of places currently measuring GNH.

Work absorbs at least half of our waking hours. After spending our youth preparing for work we willingly surrender our autonomy to an organization in a 24/7 world. That organization recruits us, owns our work, trains us, evaluates us, promotes us, provides much of our connection to a social life, and influences our overall quality of life as well as our lifestyle, determines where we live, the kind of education our children will receive; and, ultimately, our interests become almost completely subordinated to those of the organization. Of course, this is mostly a characterization of life in the West, especially in the US, and not necessarily of Bhutan.

Measuring Work and Well-being

When the UK measured the quality of life for the first time at the national level, it asked only one question regarding work and it was about job satisfaction (Office for National Statistics (UK), 2012). Interestingly, the most significant finding was about those whom didn't work. Teenagers and pensioners were happiest. Could one conclude that just being out of the labour force was a significant influence on happiness or could it be, perhaps, that being part of the labour force depresses one's ability to be happy? There are other interpretations as well, but the ambiguity of meaning here suggests that further research on the influence of work on happiness would be useful – especially given the significance of work in the lives of Westerners who spend most of their day in work-related activities and whose mental space is considerably occupied by concerns about work. Indeed, one question is simply insufficient to be used to determine the influence of the workplace on personal well-being.

Table 1. Factors contributing to a low and high quality of work life

Factors contributing to low quality of work life	Factors contributing to high quality of work life
Poor working environments	Fair Pay and Autonomy
Manager aggression	Job security
Workload, inability to deliver quality of work preferred	Reward systems
Balance of work and family	Training and career advancements
Shiftwork and constant e-connection	Opportunities
Lack of involvement in decision-making	Participation in decision making
Professional isolation	Interesting and satisfying work
Lack of recognition	Trust in senior management
Poor relationships with supervisor/peers	Recognition of efforts
Role conflict	Health and safety standards at work
Lack of opportunity to learn new skills	Balance between the time spent at work and the time spent with family and friends
	Amount of work to be done
	Level of stress experienced at work
	Occupational health and safety at work

For Gallup-Healthways,³ the four parts of well-being at work include: “job satisfaction; ability to use one’s strengths at work; supervisor’s treatment; and, supervisor creates an open and trusting work environment,” a good, but incomplete start to a more comprehensive understanding of the influence of work on well-being. After conducting a thorough review of the literature on quality of work life (QWL), Nanjundeswaraswamy and Swamy (2013) concluded that there is agreement on what creates a high quality of work life environment. The following Table 1 includes a synthesis of some of their findings:

Thus, the missing piece in measuring GNH is the lack of a more detailed understanding of our experience of our lives at work—something more explanatory. Perhaps we should pay more attention to the work itself, something deeper than simply whether one has a job and how much it pays. When others have tried to elaborate on the

³ <http://www.well-beingindex.com>, n.d.

workplace experience, the orientation has been on those factors among employees that serve management such as a feeling of loyalty, the extent of personal motivation, one's responsiveness to rewards; and not relationships with colleagues and supervisors, or the adequacy of opportunities for professional growth, for example. The attention of many of the surveys that are used to measure workers' satisfaction is to further the goal of increasing productivity, and job longevity.

Given the constant pressure for growth and profits, ultimately, work demands increase to a point that threatens to outstrip our capacity to succeed over a career. We hit a dangerous level of stress and a point at which our skills are no longer capable of meeting the demands of our workplace as it continually strives to reduce costs, eliminate waste, and decrease the time necessary to produce a unit of product or service at an ever-higher level of quality. Thus, our measures have missed some of the most significant factors contributing to happiness at work and a significant part of GNH.

Buckingham and Coffman (1999) suggested a way of measuring employee engagement that suggests a concern for everyone's well-being. They created a list of 12 questions that delve into two main issues: whether the social milieu is supportive and caring and the nature of job-related aspects that hint at the possibility that under some circumstances doing well for the organization can result in our heightened positive experience of the workplace. See Table 2 for their list of their questions:

Table 2: Buckingham and Coffman’s employee engagement questionnaire

1	Do I know what is expected of me at work?
2	Do I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right?
3	At work, do I have the opportunity to do what I do best everyday?
4	In the last seven days, have I received recognition or praise for doing good work?
5	Does my supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about me as a person?
6	Is there someone at work who encourages my development?
7	At work, do my opinions seem to count?
8	Does the mission/purpose of my company make me feel my job is important?
9	Are my co-workers committed to doing quality work?
10	Do I have a best friend at work?
11	In the last six months, has someone at work talked to me about my progress?
12	This last year, have I had opportunities at work to learn and grow?

In the Spirit of Eudaimonia: Humanistic Management or Eupsychian Management

There is a long tradition of what is called humanistic management characterized by sensitivity to relations among and between workers (employees and managers) and their role in the organization that developed immediately after the Hawthorne experiments (Mayo, 1933/2003). This tradition ran through the works of various authors and took various names such as participative management, democratic management, self-management, and eupsychian (psychologically healthy) management. The fundamental ideas of this school of thought included the belief that work should be, if it isn’t already, a pathway to self-actualization or personal growth to the point of becoming “fully human” (Maslow, 1967).

In this way of thinking, work becomes an expression of character and personal growth. It is a primary way in which one’s relationship to one’s community and the full economic and demographic spectrum of people is developed. Work is the vehicle for developing one’s economic standing and lifestyle. Work mandates our time use, limits activity, freedom of movement, freedom of expression; but, where the workplace

is managed in the spirit of community, work becomes a venue to express citizenship and one's personal efficacy in a supportive societal context.

Threats to Well-being in the Typical Large Workplace

In the quest for efficiency and productivity in an ever compressed time period, the obsession with performance moulds our behaviour, beliefs, values, self-esteem, sense of purpose that is ongoing and more demanding each year—all in service to ever growing stretch-targets of improvement toward organizationally determined goals. Along with the pressure to perform at ever-higher levels comes economic instability, increased powerlessness, a decline in human connection, alienation from a sense of purpose and yet an increased dependence on the organization for one's livelihood, healthcare, and other necessities. When people are viewed only as a factor of production, a cost, a burden, an instrument—our efforts result in developing technologies that threaten to first become our master and then successor.

Forming the New Organization

In the spirit of GNH, a new form of organization is emerging that is more human friendly and representative of the spirit of GNH and the humanistic management tradition. And it is happening outside the realm of the typical large organization. Prior strategies for humanizing large organizations focused on changing the organization, but the new strategy is to embrace a lifestyle change and to accept the fact that the typical large organization using the same bottom line principles oriented toward perpetual growth cannot be changed any more than a yak can be taught to fly. Ultimately, as new grassroots efforts succeed and attract more and more people to small and medium sized alternative models, many more people will, by their acting on their enlightened choice be contributing to the transformation of our collective consciousness. In the long run, that may in turn transform the typical large organization as well, but what is most important now to those making the choice is to find the congruence of living one's values

at home and at work resulting in a heightened sense of well-being and creating a purposeful life.

New Organizing Goals

As work becomes more aligned with one's values and a renewed sense of purpose is realized in attending to small and medium sized enterprises with like-minded people, something extraordinary happens—one begins to re-experience a loving, compassionate acceptance, with a shared vision of the community as a social as well as economic instrument. In an enterprise closer to human scale where one can know and develop natural relationships with others each person becomes conscious of the norms, implicit values, structures, behaviours expected of leaders, policies, fair and effective rewards, a just and accountable distribution of power and an efficacious role in assuring the organization operates according to the shared interests of its members. In this way, the organization will be a collective instrument of the well-being of all its members.

The Future is Emerging in Our Midst

It is all around us, but for those of us in traditional careers and workplaces, we can't see them or hesitate to trust them; they're too experimental, too risky; too unconventional. This is in part because our usual professional journals and the business press rarely if ever focuses attention on their successes though it is quick to point out the great experiments when they fail. These experiments simply challenge the conventional wisdom in a way that unsettles the traditionalists that don't want their practices undermined or questioned. They're too revolutionary. Yet, there are many organizations that have succeeded with a new set of values that are exciting their members and serve as great exemplars. Here are a few sources of further information:

Independent and networked ecovillages around the world (UK)
www.ecovillage.org

Mondragon, (Spain) a multi-national cooperative based enterprise that rivals a traditional MNC, but living cooperative values.
www.mondragon-corporation.com

BALLE; a network connected by Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (USA) www.bealocalist.org.

Organic Valley farmers' cooperative (USA)
www.organicvalley.coop/products/butter

NCEO; National Center for Employee Ownership (USA)
www.nceo.org/articles/employee-ownership-100

Intentional Communities (USA) www.ic.org

Sarvodaya (Sri Lanka) www.sarvodaya.org

These organizations are just a random selection of well known sources that address possibilities for new ways of organizing and living values in an organizational setting congruent with the personal values held by those who choose to work in these organizations. Perhaps they can help others see how to create congruence in their organizations and increase well-being at work for all.

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